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Interview with Al Schnupp

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Professor Al Schnupp

INTERVIEW WITH AL SCHNUPP

Playwright & Professor of Theatre

Al Schnupp was trained at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City before receiving his doctorate from UCLA. He is the recipient of the Margo Jones National Playwriting Award for the play, *My Body*, which was later published. Other published works include the textbook, *Theatre: A Model of the World*, a book of original monologues entitled, *The Harper Chronicles*, an improvisational gamebook, called *Bravo!*, and the play, *Censored*. He is co-author and designer of *The Stone Circle*, which won an UNIMA International Citation of Excellence. Over the course of his career,

Dr. Schnupp has designed and/or directed approximately one hundred productions. He also participates in a variety of arts-and-crafts festivals throughout California.

Mary Kay Harrington: What's new?

AS: I'm teaching a general education introduction to theatre class to 250 students and I'm loving it!

MKH: Please outline the creative work that you do.

AS: I write plays of course, experimenting with the content and the format. As for my art, I love the visual and the tactile. I love molding, sculpting, and painting—few of my pieces are two-dimensional.

MKH: Where did your creative sparks begin?

AS: I grew up in a Mennonite community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, a strict and prescribed life. I went to public schools so I clearly stood apart from the other students because I was dressed differently. But, in addition to being an outsider because of religious beliefs, I struggled with identity issues and that, too, set me apart from others. As a result, I developed a kind of lone-ness, not loneliness, but lone-ness. I sometimes created a dream world, a world of fabrication and imagination. I think I learned to go inward to figure things out and to escape from the world.

MKH: Let's talk about the Muse. Do you invoke the Muse in some way or does he/she just come to you? Or do you sit down, regardless of your energy and begin to write?

AS: Well, let me start with something I'll call "pre-muse." I create an environment that's not cluttered. I've chosen to have access to only one tv broadcast station, I don't listen to much music, and I empty my email every day before I go home. I create silence around me as much as possible. That's for my writing, of course. When I'm working on a project, I carry a clipboard everywhere. On it, I jot down any notes or thoughts I have

about my play. I even take it with me into movies. What if I get an idea and have nothing to write on? The process itself leads to new and more ideas.

I'm working on two projects right now: a spoof on political figures and a reworking of classic myths in which stones play a prominent role. The spoof was inspired by *The Bald Soprano*, *King Ubu*, and contemporary politics. The piece on stones was inspired by the play *Metamorphosis*. So if there is a muse, she makes herself known in the midst of stimulating activity, such as reading or engaging in conversation. She doesn't speak in a vacuum. As for my sculpting and painting, I don't require the same uncluttered environment. I can tolerate more chaos.

When I'm designing sets for a play (small doll-house like rooms) or solving any artistic problem, I build several models or require myself to come up with several solutions. I believe the first idea is always a cliché and the obvious solution, but those that follow usually have something.

MKH: What's your most satisfying creative moment or moments?

AS: I think it's finding the absolutely perfect final word of a play. That's very difficult. For example, in *Three Tall Women*, the last word is "Stop." And in *The Shadow Box*, it's "This moment." In the context of these plays, of what's gone before, these final words are the right ones.

I also love the moment when I find a concept for a play, when there's something in the dialogue that tells me how to approach it as a director. It can't be a cliché, but a hidden gem somewhere in the play. When I read the speech by Hecuba in which she pleads with Agamemnon to allow her to kill the man who killed her son, I realized that the play should be signed.

MKH: Do you think everyone is creative? Can creativity be taught?

AS: No. I think it can be nurtured and developed. So much depends on genes and environment; it may not be completely in-born. I think creativity reflects the spirit of a person. I see people who choose to be bored; it's actually a choice. And you certainly can't be creative if you're bored! Curiosity is the key. A creative person is a kind of rebel, a good critical thinker. He or she tries to find the opposite or contradiction of what he sees or hears. When I was a young actor, teachers used to tell me that I was really a director disguised as an actor; I couldn't settle on a choice—I made too many!

MKH: Do you wish your students came to you with more knowledge, some different skills or dispositions?

AS: Many of them have had some experience reading plays. They've read *Death of a Salesman*, *Oedipus*, some Shakespeare in high school. What they don't sometimes have is patience. They're used to the pace of a video. Therefore the slower pace of a language-

oriented medium frustrates them. I guess I wish more students were passionate about these ideas and had a more sophisticated work ethic. Still, I'm not that sympathetic when people lament the changes in education and in students. More than progressing or slipping backwards, I tend to think we're recycling. Students haven't really changed over time, except outwardly, their fashion, their gestures, their vocabulary. For every 5000 words that Shakespeare knew that our students don't know, there are 5000 words that our students know that Shakespeare didn't. Certainly, our students are more visually oriented.

I really like the notion voiced by my colleague, Erma Stauffer, that higher education doesn't mean that you go farther up into your head; it means that you go deeper into your heart. Nice idea. We, in the Liberal Arts, need to embrace the head and heart.


MKH: Have your strategies for teaching theatre changed over time?

AS: No, not really. I think my understanding has deepened, some techniques have changed, but there haven't been drastic changes in principles. Acting, for example, is still based on understanding and integrating principles of human psychology.

MKH: Where will you be in five years? What's next?

AS: Certainly I'd like to continue experimenting as a writer, and I'd like to travel more. Travel opens me up, helps me see things. As for the visual arts, I'm always moving into new territory.

Currently, I'm crafting three-dimensional paintings. Most are portraits, inspired by famous paintings of the masters. Generally, each work features one character. However, I do create group scenes from time to time. Over winter break, I created a large sculptured painting that features six famous artists selling their wares from booths at an art festival. It was fun—placing a group of historical figures, who never met each other, in one location and in a setting unfamiliar to them. Imagine going to the Harbor Festival in Morro Bay and encountering Picasso offering *Les Femmes d'Alger* for sale?

I'd like to be part of a company of maybe eight people, from different disciplines—dancers, artists, writers, folks in physical theatre, musicians. We'd work on improvising, moving toward a public performance when the work comes together—no deadlines. That's my fantasy. 

Interview conducted by Mary Kay Harrington, Professor of English and Director of the Writing Skills Program.

Photograph by Ruben Diaz.